



Saved? Well, perhaps ...

RSG's trustees have been anxiously discussing how to deal with our ongoing funding crisis. The office has been busy with applications for funding (alongside doing all its day to day work) and it was a huge relief when we heard that our latest application, to the Henry Smith Charity, had been successful. They awarded us £20,000 for next year and the year after, and £18,000 for the year after that! a wonderful success for Annette's fundraising efforts. This combines with the £15,000 from Getty (reported in the March-April issue),

Positive Steps and £3000 from Sport Relief to give us much brighter prospects.

However our annual running costs are more like £80,000, so we still have some way to go before we have replaced our previous funding from the Home Office and the Community Fund.

Trustees have been considering how best to cope with a possible shortfall in funding. A working group decided that there were two basic possible strategies: we could go on with our normal

level of service until the money ran out and then stop dead; or we could slim our service so as to be able to go on longer. The latter would involve Annette becoming part-time, which she has very kindly said she would be prepared to accept.

Arguments for the full stop proposal were that it would be easier for staff – there would be no confusion about levels of service – and they would be paid in full. Some also thought that it would demonstrate the value of our service for possible future backers. The Red Cross has already expressed anxiety as to what would fill the gap

Next page →

Office update

We continue to receive 40 – 50 visits to the office per week.

Issues we deal with include:

Family visas – wives' settlement applications are being refused because the embassy doesn't believe they have met, or there is insufficient evidence that they are married. For the majority of people we have helped regarding this the problems seem to stem from the agency (Fedex) being used in Pakistan who complete and submit the forms – very little

information being given and often poor translation or no translation. We have been able to help the men here complete new applications to send on to their wives, with more detailed information and asking them to gather lots of evidence such as photographs, witness statements, passport stamps showing when they were in the country etc.

One man here successfully had a decision overturned after providing lots of information when he put in an ap-

Page 3 →

ANNUAL GENERAL MEETING

Wednesday 26th September at 6 pm. *Please contact the office to tell us you're coming and for details of the venue.*

AGENDA

- 1 Minutes
- 2 Annual report and accounts
- 3 Elections
- 4 Any other business

After the meeting there will be poetry and music, and refreshments provided by the Women's Outreach Group.

Also in this issue

Committee report (next page)

The allotment and Population record (page 3)

Can we integrate? (page 4)

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RSG management committee

Next meeting is Wednesday 26th September at 6 pm (the AGM). Everyone welcome, but *please let the office know if you're coming.*

Every meeting starts by considering any proposals or requests put forward by asylum seekers, who are particularly welcome. Agenda items to the office if possible two weeks before the meeting, please.

NB views expressed in this newsletter are not necessarily those of the Refugee Support Group Devon

Saved, perhaps

← Previous page

left if RSG ceased operating. Opposing arguments were that closing down early would let down people who were dependent on our service. Stretching out longer would give us more time to find funding. And some thought that once we closed down we would be seen as a failure and therefore not be able to attract funding; we would also lose staff, volunteers and trustees and have to start again (at some stage) from scratch. It was very obvious that there wasn't one correct answer to our problem, which was put to RSG trustees at their latest meeting.

Further funding possibilities
Meanwhile fundraising goes on. The most promising possibility at the moment is probably the H C D Memorial Fund, which has received an application for enough money to keep us going for the next three years. If this bid is successful we will have won sufficient time to set up a permanent fundraising structure (H C D are interested in saving us from our current problems, but not in funding us long-term). What would be especially useful about H C D is that their grant would be unrestricted.

Another possible funder is the Triangle Trust (a bid currently in for £10,000).

The Henry Smith Charity

This is one of the older and bigger of our charitable endowments, and came from the will of Henry Smith, who died in 1628. He wished the money to be used to relieve poverty among his poor relations and also among poor clergy. He also wishes to contribute to 'the relief and rehabilitation of persons who have been or are serfs or slaves who are in need or distress or for preventing their seizure'. Apart from these aims the fund has been used for a wide variety of charitable purposes, including the relief of people sick or in need including refugees and the homeless, and in 2005 paid out just under £20m in grants. (Only 27% of appeals were successful, which underlines our good fortune.)

The H C D Memorial Fund

This is a medium-sized trust run by the Debenham family, dedicated to the memory of the current generation's grandfather (whose initials were H C D). It likes to spend money mostly on charities overseas or (in the UK) in Sussex and Ireland. Since we're not in any of those places our enquiry was a bit cheeky, but the secretary said we just might have a chance since 'one

of our trustees is interested in refugees'.

H C D spend about £600,000 a year (£400,000 in the UK). They say they like to take risks, and are interested in funding charities which might otherwise go under (a description we have been applying to ourselves). Their main overall aim is the relief of poverty, and they prefer small-to-medium charities.

They also prefer to fund organisations: 'we're not interested in projects'. What this means is that if we do receive any money from them it will be unrestricted: having approved of RSG as an organisation (if they do) they would then leave the decisions about how to spend the money to us. Unrestricted funds are obviously much easier to administer, and in the current situation where the needs of refugees change month by month it would give us very welcome flexibility.

The Triangle Trust

This is another medium-sized trust, spending around £500,000 in a typical year. They are interested in welfare, but recently specified this more narrowly as 'integrating or re-integrating individuals into society'. They say that they don't usually respond to unsolicited applications but sent us an application when we asked. Annette has been labouring over this and again, we have some hopes of success.

Committee report

The RSG management committee met on 25th July and 5th September. The main issues discussed were:

Fundraising – see above.

Criticism of RSG – the committee received reports from a number of special meetings to discuss complaints by some service users. It was agreed that funding would be

sought to employ additional staff who would be able to liaise more effectively with service users whose English was not good, and help them to improve it. (Exeter College's classes are not being provided free.) It was also agreed that arrangements for feedback from service users about the service provided by RSG would be improved.

In this context, a meeting would be organised by Jahan Darik to

hear further suggestions by service users and make recommendations to RSG management.

Annual general meeting

This was scheduled for 26th September, to be held at St Sidwell's, with music and poetry, food and an exhibition provided by service users.

Four trustees were due to retire (as the constitution requires) but were eligible (and were nominated) for re-election. These

were Francisca van Holthoon, David Mezzetti, Lawrence Sail and Neil Whiter. RSG would receive nominations for other trustees. One nomination, of Jahan Darik, had already been received. The officers would be elected or re-elected by the AGM.

It was pointed out that the existing constitution was not entirely clear about arrangements for electing trustees and officers. It was proposed that revisions to the constitution be made in order to rectify this. This would be done as soon as possible, but could not be done before the AGM.

Office update

← Page 1

peal. Others are needing to submit fresh applications as their original applications clearly had so little information there was no basis for appealing. The IAS (Immigration Advisory Service) has been most helpful in these matters.

The arrival of children – the hard work in the past few months finally paid off! This has presented more challenges around housing, and sorting out schooling for the children. It has been difficult arranging schools because of the school holidays, but places have been allocated and 6 children enrol this week.

Citizenship applications – more men have passed the life in the UK test and are submitting applications for citizenship. We are referring people to use the Nationality Checking Service before sending off applications – this way they do not have to relinquish vital documents, as well as having the form checked over again. To date we are aware of at least a handful of Afghan men who have gained British nationality.

With a recent High Court ruling for indefinite leave to remain there have been many requests to help find solicitors from some of our Afghan friends. The court ruling was that those who arrived in the UK at the time when there was a policy to grant people indefinite or exceptional leave to remain, but whose decisions were significantly delayed, should have been granted this permission to remain. For those who did not get interviews or decisions for a long period of time, there may be opportunities now to appeal their cases. We have spent a considerable amount of time seeking solicitors prepared to meet individuals with this situation in mind.

Destitution – We are seeing an average of 15 destitute asylum seekers each week needing support from the emergency fund. We are able to help with food parcels as well as £10 cash. This support is available through the generous donations of supporters and help from St Petrock's. We still need more funds for this area of work.

Help for service users outside Exeter – we are currently helping some clients who have moved away from Exeter. This involves regular support to two people at present.

Leisure – we have issued 20 leisure passes in the last two months and are receiving positive feedback. However without further funding we can't continue this indefinitely.

The allotment

Hard work pays off with bumper crop

Pat Comery writes from her Greek idyll (fortunately not burned to a crisp this time): some good work has been done down at the allotment in recent weeks. Gholam has done some impressive shed construction. There have been courgettes (as ever), runner and French beans, chard, perpetual spinach, onions and potatoes. All have found their way up to the RSG office recently. The leeks and Brussel sprouts are coming on nicely.

Very tasty and juicy blackberries are ripe now and apples are there for the taking -so get down there, pie-makers. It will soon be time for the Great Manure Run (ready



with the trailer, Jeremy?) and the autumn Big Dig (all help appreciated).

Population record

More population panic. But will immigrants save us from the consequences of living longer, or will all the wrinklies emigrate?

'UK population growth is environmentally unsustainable, from a national and international point of view, and if it is environmentally unsustainable it is also economically unsustainable, for without ecologically healthy land our economy will not be able to support its own people without causing damage to the environment of other nations.' This was the response of the Optimum Population Trust to the news that the UK's population had reached an all-time high of nearly 61m. The population was 56m in 1971, and is currently increasing at about 0.6% a year.

The reason for population growth is partly the excess of births over deaths. Last year there were 670,000 births in the UK, up by 13% over 2001. The number of deaths was 503,000: down around 12% over 2001. The increase in births was partly due to immigration and partly to older women having more children. 22% of births were to mothers born outside the UK, and areas with high proportions of immigrants saw higher rates of growth. Older mothers also produced more babies – the propor-

tion of births to mothers of 40 or over was 22%, twice what it was in 1986. The decline in the number of deaths meant people living longer: people of 65 or over increased to 16%, up 13% since 1971, and the numbers of under-sixteens decreased to 19% (down 19%). This means 2.3m more old people and 2.7m fewer children. If this goes on our population will be unable to sustain itself: maybe immigrants will produce the extra children we need; and maybe the wrinklies will emigrate ...

The other factor is net immigration. People entering Britain to stay were estimated at 574,000 (compared with 582,000 three years ago), whereas there were 196,000 emigrants: a net inflow of 386,000, which added to the surplus of births over deaths (167,000) made up a total population increase of 553,000. (Asylum seekers, including dependants, numbered 31,000, or 0.06%.) The proportion contributed by net immigration, compared to increase caused by falling death rates and rising birth rates, has been falling, but net immigration is still the biggest cause of population rise.

Can we integrate?

As noted in the last issue, our ability to integrate immigrants successfully is a matter of anxious discussion in many quarters. What standards are we entitled to demand of them?

Immigration continues to worry people. It should. The recent panic about eastern Europe seems to be declining: as wages rise in Poland the attractions of Britain diminish, and we never did seem have much allure for the Romanians and Bulgarians. With fewer low-paid immigrants on the farms Wimbledon was said this year to be in serious danger as strawberries rotted unpicked in East Anglia.

However the longer-term picture is nowhere near as welcome. With numbers of disastrously destructive ongoing conflicts and failed states around the world, we already see the numbers of displaced rising: international refugee flows 14% up on 2006 (UN estimate 10m), internally displaced at 25m or possibly more (and not counting 4m Palestinians). We are seeing what may be the beginnings of a long term increase. And this is without considering global warming, which may eventually push the total to up to a billion.

Britain counts as one of the world's most successful societies in integrating immigrants, but there are still persistent signs of strain. Many people are beginning to say that 'multiculturalism' is becoming less and less viable and should be rethought. Politicians are quick to adapt to these anxieties, as always, by reassuring us that they know how special we are and will protect us against the aliens at the gate (or, in many cases, firmly inside it).

In Gordon Brown's recent address to the TUC he followed the accustomed New Labour line by promising to create 'more jobs for *British* men and women and young people' [my italics]. The word 'British' occurs 25 times in a relatively short speech of 5000 words.

We get the message: don't get angry about cutting the wages of public service workers while fat cats reap millions: help me to get angry with the foreigners who undercut you, instead.

Thus, so far politicians have responded by promising to get tough. More recently they (and especially Brown) have started to develop the theme of 'Britishness'. Is there any useful meaning in this, and does it have any message for people who are

living in Britain but who see themselves as part of a non-indigenous culture?

In a pamphlet issued earlier this year Ruth Kelly and Liam Byrne list ways in which immigrants should behave to make themselves acceptable, and offer a points-based system for the award of citizenship. In his TUC speech Gordon Brown offers to make learning English compulsory. Various people have tried to list the qualifying criteria of 'British' culture, with the implication (sometimes explicit) that immigrants ought to conform to them.

As someone who taught British history for many years, I have to say that most of these efforts make me feel nauseous. But the fact that much of this stuff is laughably naïve, and the fact that politicians offer it with lamentably disreputable motives, should not blind us to the possibility that there is a core of truth here. The trouble arises when we try to distinguish British culture from that of other countries. When we claim to be tolerant, or self-deprecating, or to love queues, or cricket, or whatever, two things happen: first, we are confronted with the history of British interactions with the rest of the world, and are revealed as instant hypocrites. Second, somebody points out that lots of other countries have those characteristics, too.

So trying to identify the ways in which Britain is unique simply doesn't work. It is a political device, typically used to cover up something politicians are doing that we don't like. When politicians use the word 'British', check your wallet.

What does work is sticking to what we *can* define clearly, namely our national laws. And these are linked with many international agreements which express principles we share with other, similar, cultures. We need only be clear that anyone living (temporarily or permanently does not matter, and nor does ethnicity) in the UK must conform to these. The underlying principles are not peculiarly 'British', and are shared by many other peoples across the world. There is no question of Britain having a monopoly on any particular cultural preferences, and in fact the basic question is nothing to do with culture.

Ruth Kelly: 'a critical risk that after 40 years in which diversity has grown, Britain's communities stop looking outwards, celebrating what they have in common and instead begin looking inward,



stressing their differences and divisions'.

Gordon Brown: 'I believe that because these islands – and our maritime and trading traditions – have made us remarkably outward looking and open, this country has fostered a vigorously adaptable society and has given rise to a ...



passion for liberty anchored in a sense of duty and an intrinsic commitment to tolerance and fair play'.

If my culture leads me to break the law, or contravene the International Convention on Human Rights, I will be banged up. If it doesn't, however distasteful my behaviour may be to the British, I won't. Wearing a five-piece all-over swimming costume in the park is OK; so (almost unbelievably) is flying a St George's cross. Forcing my daughter to marry someone she doesn't want to isn't. Nor is mutilating the genitals of little girls. Or racist abuse. Nor are bribing foreign dictators, conniving at CIA torture flights or invading foreign countries without UN authorisation.

It's important, of course, to look at our laws with a very critical eye: do we really need a law saying Prince Charles can't become a Muslim? A nation which includes many cultures must design its legal system accordingly. However in the mean time, these are the laws we've got, and everyone must obey them.

Not being able to speak English is, currently, perfectly legal. If our legislature makes it illegal, everyone will have to learn English. If it doesn't, they won't. It's that simple. [JC]